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DE RUEHDJ #0191/01 0890851
ZNR UUUUU ZZH ZDS
R 171458Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0242
INFO SOMALIA COLLECTIVE
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/CDR USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI

UNCLAS DJIBOUTI 000191

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SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI: UNHCR UPDATES CONTINGENCY PLAN FOR REFUGEES FROM
SOMALIA AND ERITREA

REF: 08 DJIBOUTI 632

¶1. SUMMARY. On February 23, Ann EnContre, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Representative in Djibouti, briefed Conoff on recent UNHCR activities, including UNHCR's latest contingency planning for a possible influx to Djibouti of up to 30,000 refugees from bordering countries. She also reported on recent incidents on UNHCR premises, including Eritrean refugees' protest for resettlement and attempted arson by a disgruntled ex-Somali refugee. On Eritrea, UNHCR reports a total of 179 Eritrean military deserters are now registered in Djibouti as asylum-seekers. EnContre also highlighted progress UNHCR has made on completing new infrastructure and improving protection at the Ali Adde refugee camp. END SUMMARY.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING FOR INFLUX OF 30,000 REFUGEES

¶2. According to EnContre, UNHCR has prepared an emergency contingency plan for up to 30,000 additional refugees (25,000 Somalis; 4,000 Ethiopians; and 1,000 Eritreans) in Djibouti, due to instability in bordering countries. (NOTE: There are approximately 9,000 refugees currently in Djibouti. END NOTE.) EnContre explained that if the recent election of the new Somali government caused increased fighting in Somalia, then a large refugee influx could stream into Djibouti and Ethiopia--rather than Kenya--due to the closure of Kenya's borders. Close ethnic ties between Djiboutians and Somalis may also cause some Somalis to take refuge in Djibouti, as they have in the past. Furthermore, UNHCR anticipates Djibouti receiving more refugees from Ethiopia's Ogaden region, due to increasing conflict and human rights violations there, and the proximity between Ethiopia and Djibouti.

ERITREAN MILITARY DESERTERS

13. EnContre believes the unresolved border conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea will cause Eritreans living in border towns to cross over from Eritrea and seek asylum in Djibouti (on February 26, UNHCR received Eritrean refugees from the Government of Djibouti). UNHCR also reports a growing number of deserters or defectors from the Eritrean military: as of early March, a total of 129 have been registered in Djibouti as asylum-seekers. Of the 129 Eritreans, 73 were recognized in December 2008 as refugees under UNHCR's mandate, and are currently being reviewed for resettlement.

ERITREAN REFUGEES PROTEST FOR RESETTLEMENT

14. On January 21, news of the recent resettlement of Eritrean refugees from Ethiopia's Shimelba refugee camp caused 17 Eritrean refugees to protest at the UNHCR office in Djibouti. The group threatened a hunger strike if their demands for immediate resettlement were not met, despite written assurances by UNHCR Protection staff that their cases would be reviewed. Because the GODJ had banned public gatherings due to the UN-sponsored Somali reconciliation talks, the protestors were arrested, but were later released with UNHCR's assistance.

15. On February 18, UNHCR met with seven Eritrean refugees detained by Djiboutian authorities while seeking to cross from Djibouti to Ethiopia at Galilleh. The refugees, who held family attestations issued by UNHCR in Djibouti and by ONARS (GODJ's refugee agency), claimed that the ongoing Eritrean-Djiboutian border conflict threatened their personal safety, as they received insults and hostile treatment from Djiboutians. They also reported having lost their jobs because of their nationality, and requested resettlement in Ethiopia, Kenya, or Sudan.

16. UNHCR advised the refugees not to pressure the Djiboutian Government, as it had offered them protection for the last nine years. UNHCR also noted that leaving a country of asylum involved serious risks, and that asking for asylum in Ethiopia would mean their cases would have to start from scratch. After meeting with UNHCR, the Eritrean refugees expressed their readiness to return to Djibouti. However, they refused to return to Djibouti City, citing insecurity, and requested placement instead in the Ali Addeh refugee camp or the town of Ali Sabieh.

REGISTRATION RESUMES

17. As a result of GODJ security measures imposed in early 2009, when Djibouti was hosting UN-sponsored Somali reconciliation talks, the registration of new refugee arrivals from south and central Somalia (at Loyada, on the Djibouti-Somaliland border) had been suspended for four consecutive weeks, beginning January 14. Registration resumed on February 23.

NEW CONSTRUCTION IN ALI ADDE REFUGEE CAMP

¶18. UNHCR has started constructing two new classrooms (size 8 x 6 meters) and fencing around the north and east sides of the school compound in the Ali Adde camp, to accommodate newly arrived refugee children from south/central Somalia. Three tents were given to the director of the school on January 26 for use as temporary classrooms. School materials purchased for the refugee children were to be delivered to the school in mid-March.

¶19. Another project in completion at Ali Adde is a UNHCR office, to provide work space for UNHCR staff, such as the Senior Protection officer. By the end of March 2009, UNHCR also hopes to have a makeshift transit center at the refugee camp.

NGOS AND THE GOV ASSIST WITH HEALTH CARE

¶10. Representatives of LIFE International, UNHCR, and the Association of Medical Doctors of Asia (AMDA) met February 18 to assess cooperation among all three parties. LIFE International (a 2008 grantee of the Ambassador's Fund for Refugees) continues to

provide skills training to refugee women at the refugee camp, and LIFE's pediatrician has begun giving reinforcement training to AMDA's nurses and community health workers in the areas of maternal health and morbidity.

¶11. On February 16, UNHCR and the Ministry of Health agreed to transfer the nutrition, maternity, and infant/child programs from the AMDA clinic to the Ministry's National Health Center at Ali Adde.

¶12. COMMENT. Unlike Ethiopia, Djibouti has yet to see a significant influx of Somali refugees since the election of the new Somali government in early 2009. Just weeks after UNHCR submitted a contingency plan for 25,000 Somalis, UNHCR Geneva reported that more than 40,000 internally displaced people had returned to Mogadishu. Refugees fleeing Eritrea, or from instability in southern Somalia, would significantly strain Djibouti's limited infrastructure, which has seen the number of refugees at Ali Adde--its sole refugee camp--increase by 50 per cent over the last 18 months. END COMMENT.

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